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ABSTRACT

American education must develop a system for promoting understanding among and with minority cultures. Curriculums should be designed which add relevancy to the education of minority groups and abandon the traditional ideas of Americanization which call for, among other things, the foreigner to become a good speaker of English. English-as-a-second-language programs have helped to develop a kind of mutual respect for foreign and American cultures. Bilingualism is making negative contributions to the American educational scene. These negative aspects should be taken into consideration when developing curriculums which will incorporate minority recognition while operating within the English language framework. (VM)

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A Look at Minority Education Today

with

Implications for the Teaching

of

English

by

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In this modern age of jets and ABMs, of space ships and astronauts, where man seems to be expanding his horizons to science fiction like proportions, one might feel somewhat trite in making a plea for better human understanding. Perhaps the reason why asking for this little bit of kindness ~~might~~ seems a monumental task, as compared to that of putting space ships in orbit is because when working with machines, the scientist works with facts and figures, which if correctly programmed, will prove true. While, when working with human beings, the scientist does not work with simple facts, but rather with complex human interrelationships which are relevant to that individual in that culture at that specific time in history.

Scientists have long been investigating ways by which to promote better understanding among human beings of all races. In one of these sciences, called socio-linguistics, Wharf writes, " What needs to be clearly seen by the anthropologist who, to a large extent has gotten the idea that linguistics is merely a highly specialized and tediously technical pidgeonhole in a far corner of the anthropological workshop, is that linguistics is essentially the quest of meaning. It may seem to the outsider to be inordinately absorbed in recording hair-splitting distinctions of sound,

performing phonetic gymnastics, and writing complex grammars which only grammarians read. But the simple fact is that its real concern is to light up the thick darkness of language, of a given community, with the light of this "golden something", as I have heard it called, this transmuting principle of meaning. As I have tried to show, this amounts to far more than learning to speak and understand the language as the practical language teacher conceives these ends. The investigator of the culture should hold an ideal of linguistics as that of heuristic approach to problems of psychology which hitherto he may have shrunk from considering- a glass through which, when correctly focussed, will appear the TRUE SHAPES of many of those forces which hitherto have been to him but the inscrutible blank of invisible and bodiless thought." [1.]

On close examination of this idea, it would appear to this writer that the lack of implementation of principles which are involved here, in the past, would account for much of the racial misunderstanding we Americans suffer from today.

Grammar vs Usage

Grammarians have been arguing the battle of "saying it the proper way"(standard English) vs. "saying it like it is", (non-standard English) for a countless number of years.

1."Thinking in Primitive Communities", B.L. Whorf, Language, Thought and Reality, ed. J.B. Carroll, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1956, p. 73

And, it appears that while this magnificent intellectual battle has been raging, little, if any consideration has been given to the ethnological value of the learning of a language. Sapir noted long ago that, "... in language, no two individuals might speak exactly alike. However, unless two individuals followed some general predictable pattern, then, communication would break down."[2.] When coming to a foreign country, the immigrant is expected to conform to the language and the culture of that people. If he doesn't, he's out of step with that culture and his success in that society is limited. In the past, speakers of foreign languages, citizens of bi-cultural backgrounds, have been "out of step" and have suffered a limited amount of success in our country either because of their lack of facility with standard English or because of their lack of desire to conform (in speaking and otherwise) with a society which places little value on the unique contributions which their bi-cultural backgrounds might bring to that society. One need only go to a Mexican "Jamaica", to a Portugese "Festa" or to an Italian "Santo" to see how highly the Latins esteem their language; where everyone speaks the mother tongue and where the most respected is often the child who speaks his native tongue the best.

If this child's ability to speak his own language well evokes praise and admiration from his own countrymen, would it not evoke even greater praise from them for the foreigner

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2. Sapir, E., Language, New York, 1921, p. 37.

(to their etanic background) who learns not only to speak tneir language out who also learns to understand their cultural differences as well?

On the other hand, there is the child who comes to the school unable to speak his native tongue, either because he is asnamed to identify with those who speak it, or because he is caught in the dilema of having to make a choice between the two. Haven't many teachers been misled into thinking that bi-lingualism is the reason why Pedro or Giovanni can't speak English well? How surprised they might be if they learned how inadequately he was able to speak his native tongue, as well.

It would appear, that ~~in this day and age, where~~ "relevancy" seems to be the keynote for motivation, would it not also appear that our country has been wasting good eager minority minds by not making their education relevant to their culture and needs? One need only search his memory of a couple of old class lists to find at least a handful of names of "drop-outs" who with a little investigation would prove this point out.

We as teachers, know from experience that when racial misunderstanding occurs in the classroom, it is often caused by prejudices which the child experiences in his home. Often, the Latino child comes to the school feeling defensive about his color, and insecure about his English. Many times he is unsuccessful in the classroom because of this. Because this

is usually coupled with poverty and illiteracy in his home and because he is often a target for abuse from his classmates, these conditions will frequently make him want to hold on to his difference; his language. He will hold on to this means of identity even if it means not succeeding in the American society.

A Lack of Minority Recognition

California shares a common border with her neighbor, south of the border Mexico. Every year, thousands of Americans cross over the border to relax in the sun, take in the sights, and enjoy the charm and hospitality of a people who are, by nature, friendly, casual and hospitable. At first meeting, it not being unusual for a Mexican to invite a norteamericano to his home to share a humble meal of beans and tortillas around the kitchen stove with his happy brood of children and proud wife. Although the meal is not fancy, you enjoy it because of its uniqueness and because of the warmth you share with your hosts. At the end of the vacation you return home, go back to the job, and often talk about your pleasant experience to the surprise of co-workers who generally think thought of Mexican food as hot and aggrevating and Mexicans people the same.

California, and the nation as a whole, suffers from this lack of interraction; from this lack of understanding of other cultures and of their contributions to the over-all American community. America is a minority! America is still that melting pot of races which the Statue of Liberty welcomed to its shores.

Still, in large cities like Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco, where there are major Spanish speaking communities, one would expect to find curricula developed long ago to encourage an understanding of Spanish speaking people; one which would promote racial pride and dignity. Quite the contrary! Although we hear rumbles of task force committees working at developing these, I would guess that this is just another device to keep the general public from getting restless. And restless they are. Not until recent years have we seen any efforts at meeting the demands of these Americans. Recently, we've seen pressure-groups force Boards of Education into initiating special programs in bi-lingual education in Spanish, Chinese, Filipino, Swahili, and who-knows- what next. Do these programs represent the desires of the thinking minority ? Not always. However, these programs are the direct result of the indifference which we "Americans" have toward minority cultures in our society.

Bi-Culturalism in our Schools?

Perhaps the best way to answer this question might be: "If minority people find themselves dis-enchanted with the American Way, what happens next?" There are evidences of disenchantment with America in minority peoples all around us. Many feel alienated from the country of their birth. When you find third, fourth, and fifth generation Spanish-speaking students refusing to speak good English; (even though most could) when you find these same students rallying together in a type of ethnic identity under the symbolic, La Raza!, American education is indeed heading for difficulties with these students now and with them later as adults.

American English, as it has been taught in the past, has encouraged this minority neglect; has, indeed, encouraged isolationism. English purists have neglected to recognize the wealth of language which the Spanish-speaking bring to English.

ESL-/ Bi-Lingualism- Positive Americanization?

American education has seen a new emphasis in minority education in the area of bi-lingualism. Is this a new animal in the educational menagerie or is this an old friend turned hostile with a few spots and a quick temper. I think the latter. Years ago, Americanization was the name given to that course of study which incorporated all disciplines in-

volved in teaching the foreigner to become a good speaker of English and which taught him the basics of American government, and the American Way. No more such animal. Minority cultures no longer want to be"Americanized" in the strict sense of the word. Tney feel a natural afinity to their native culture and dislike having to relinquish this. Although it might appear to be hair-splitting, when English nas been taught as a second language (ESL) equal recognition is apparent to both the native laguage and to the second language, English. When students are taught the various disciplines in tneir native language instead of English, it would appear tnat the opposite is true. Experience has taught tnis writer that when bi-lingualism is maintained, so separatism is nourished.

But why are more pressure groups for bi-lingual studies emerging? Is it because of recent contributions to the learning process by educational psychologists? One need only listen to the radio for a couple evening to hear some radical minority leader tell you that in order for "his" minority children to succeed, tney must learn their studies in tneir native tongue. Hogwash! Is this the kind of learning which will make the child successful in his community as an adult citizen? Will these children be able to compete on the same grounds with their more fortunate, "native American" sisters and brothers? I rather doubt it.

ESL, as I have seen it evolve, has made proper contributions to the American educational process in its effort to develop a kind of mutual respect for foreign and American cultures. Let's not confuse this with bi-lingualism. Bi-lingualism , is making negative contributions to the American educational scene; but we can still profit by our mistakes... by taking into consideration these negative aspects when developing curricula which will incorporate minority recognition while operating within the English language framework. If American educat ors don't recognize this need, we'll have our schools divided.

Militant young people, of all minority races are showing their disgust with a system which does not recognize their uniqueness; one which does not offer them the opportunity they deserve. It's not uncommon to hear young rascist militants talk about "our side" and "the enemy" for to them a real war already exists. The war they fight is one which has a daily battlefield in the classroom; one which is daily lost by the minority student and by the conscientious school teacher who does not have at his command either the proper training nor the proper educational framework within which to instruct his students in a mutual respect and understanding.

In his book, Language Today, Mario Pei writes, " It is not the word that differs, (when cultural misunderstanding occurs) but rather the thought concept it is meant to symbolize. The

only way to make the same word mean the same thing to all men is to subject all people to the selfsame life experience, which is manifestly impossible."[3] If this is so, how can we bridge that long span of time and human indifference among our many American cultures in order to develop a closer harmony and better understanding among them?

SOME POSITIVE SUGGESTIONS:

How can we work to promote better understanding among/with minority cultures?

1. Review curricula in order to incorporate units of study in English, Social Studies, Foreign Languages, etc., which emphasize better understanding of minority problems.
2. In English, books which promote puristic English should be abandoned. They should be replaced by English books which promote a better understanding of people through an ethnological study of dialect.
3. Audio-Visual aids to compliment these should be developed.
4. Multi-cultural courses of study should be developed which emphasize cultural contributions.
4. In-Service courses should be developed to instruct teachers in methods and procedures for teaching these.
6. Special incentive pay should be provided to encourage teachers and para-professionals not only to develop these units of study but also to teach them in target areas while keeping

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3. Pei, Mario, Language Today, Funk and Wagnalls, 1967, P. 96.

them up to date.

7. Textbook companies should be encouraged to develop texts which focus favorable attention to the uniqueness and positive contributions of minority Americans. Texts which "tell it like it is".

8. Experts be made available and funds be set aside to develop linguistic programs in schools. Programs which are aimed at overcoming specific difficulties which a given minority, say the Spanish-speaking or the Chinese, have in the learning of English.

A Look to the Future

Twenty years ago, our country was , for all sakes and purposes, a well-run machine. Students took showers, cut their hair and on the surface, all looked ship-shape. Today, our student complexion has changed considerably. Our country will never return to that kind of normalcy, though perhaps, it's just as well.

One need not be a fortune teller to see what America has in store for itself should it continue along its present course. Minorities, whether they be white, brown, red or yellow, are coming into their own. They expect and demand recognition. They want to aspire to the same kinds of dreams which any hard-working, capable man has the right to.

This is the task of the American educator as a whole; of the English teacher in particular. It is our job to equip our students with the tools to help them accomplish their dreams. The question is, "Will we wait ten years to recognize the problem as it really exists?" or will we work at developing a system of American education today which will result in a better understanding of all cultures and a stronger, more unified America in the future? As a minority American, I sincerely hope so.

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